DON'T MAKE ME COME DOWN THERE
December 7, 2008

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 85
John 1:6–14
Isaiah 64:1–4, 8

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down"
Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV)

What is it that we are essentially doing in this
building? The immediate answer is that
we are worshiping God here. We are trying to
speak to God here and to speak about God.
We are trying to listen for God. We are searching
for something of God's peace. But deep beneath
all of this, in our innermost hearts, I think
we are doing something else. . . . I think we are
waiting . . . waiting for the advent of light. . . .
If we take the words of Jesus as seriously
as he asks us to take them, then the realest,
truest, most authentic thing we can do as
Christians is to wait—to wait with passion,
to wait with hope.

Frederick Buechner
Secrets in the Dark

With generations before us, we wait for your coming, O God.
We wait for your intercession from the eternal to the now,
we wait for the birth, we wait f or Christmas.
Keep us watchful and alert, so we don't miss signs
of your kingdom, which is always coming
into the life of the world and into our lives:
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The refrigerator door has become a bulletin board, photo album, a repository of family memorabilia, political preference, and general folk wisdom. In our kitchen, my very favorite refrigerator magnet is solid black with small, white block letters that say "'DON'T MAKE ME COME DOWN THERE.'—GOD." Parents used to say that mild threat when children

became unruly downstairs, upstairs, wherever. It was given to me by a now-adult daughter who claims to have heard me—and her mother, but mostly me—say that a lot. “Don’t make me come down there.” Or a variation on the theme when driving down the Interstate with five children in the back of a nine-passenger station wagon, in those simple but dangerous days before infant and children’s car seats, which keep them strapped in and safe, looking for all the world like tiny astronauts about to be blasted into space, when instead they were rolling around in the back in unrestrained freedom, playing, wrestling. One time I recall an actual football game played on knees, with them finally protecting their own small turf with ferocity: “He’s touching me”; “She touched me first!” “Don’t make me pull over and come back there.” The one who gave it to me ruefully admits that she has said it herself. It’s my favorite refrigerator magnet. “‘Don’t make me come down there.’—God.”

And it is, of course, a perfect foil for our text this morning, Isaiah 64:1.

> O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
> so that the mountains would quake at your presence.

That text comes around every three years in the Lectionary in Advent, and every time I read it I think about my good friend, the late Walter Bouman, Professor of Theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. Walt, a big, jolly bear of a man with a wonderful wit, introduced a sermon on Isaiah 64 with a selection from a little book, *Children’s Letters to God*. So every few Advents or so I read Isaiah 64, think about Walt, go to the shelf, and pull down *Children’s Letters to God* and get hooked.

> Dear God,
> Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?
> Lucy
>
> Dear God,
> Is Reverend Coe a friend of yours or do you just know him through business?
> Dorothy
>
> Dear God,
> Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
> Joyce
>
> Dear God,
> Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each (other) so much if they had their own room. It works with my brother.
> Larry

Those are from a new collection; Walt's is from the original:

> Dear God,
> Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.
> Love, Harriet Anne

It's the oldest, most authentic, truest prayer in human history:

> O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
> so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . .
> —to make your name known to your adversaries,
> so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

"If you are real, you'd better do something quick," Harriet Anne put it.

The situation is this: after a generation of living in exiled captivity in Babylon, the Hebrew people have returned to the land, Israel, Jerusalem, their pride and joy, Zion, the site of their holy temple. Every Advent we sing about their waiting for God to come: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

And in the year 539 BCE, that is what happened. The Persians defeated the Babylonians and set the captives free. Now they are home, and what they find on their return is devastating: the city walls breached, the shining buildings leveled, the beloved temple, the locus of God's presence, the Holy of Holies, a charred, burned-out ruin. It is a picture of desolation, like those heart-wrenching pictures of families finally returning to their homes in the lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans after Katrina or in California after the fire: sifting through the ashes, trying to recover something of their former life, trying to deal with the stark reality that it is gone, all of it— their former life, gone.

The prophet, whose job is normally to speak for God to the people, now speaks to God for the people: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

Or put another way, Where in the world are you? Are you there? Are you listening? Have you forgotten us? Is this some kind of joke, bringing us back to this? Even your enemies are laughing. You might at least consider showing your adversaries some muscle. Shake some mountains; let them—and us—know you're still there.

Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Seminary, reminds us that there is a fancy theological term for it: *Deus Absconditus.* It's been around for centuries:

God absconded, absent, silent, jumped ship, slipped out the back door, nowhere to be found.

Defeat, exile, and then return to the devastation shook the very foundation of Israel's religious faith, and it stimulated the two most important religious questions anybody ever asked: "Why?" Why has this happened? If you are an all-powerful God, why are we, your people, suffering? And "Where?" Where is God in all this?

I suspect every one of us has asked those questions at one time or another. I suspect not a few of us are asking them this morning. The December issue of *Sojourners* magazine is devoted to the economic crisis, and the cover asks simply, "Where Is God in All This?" Editor Jim Wallis says that part of the answer is in the way the people of God respond. Human need is more visible, more present today than it was just a few months ago. The lines of people at noon in our reception area, waiting for a sack lunch, are longer. More guests than we can accommodate show up for Sunday Night Supper. Among them are now people not accustomed to waiting in line for food, people who a few months ago were employed and solvent and now hungry.

Part of the answer to "where is God in all this?" is the way God's people respond. And part of it is deeply theological. Theologian Diane Butler Bass says the crisis is a reminder that we always live in Holy Insecurity, that we are governed finally not by the stock market or housing prices, but by grace, generosity, and goodness.

Wallis says Americans are angry—"Why am I not getting a bailout?"—and afraid—"Will I lose my job, my savings, my children's college fund, my home?" We are being pushed, that is to say, back to what is permanent, lasting, most important, meaningful, and ultimately reliable, and we are learning that it isn't the market. It isn't our portfolio, our 401(k)s, our retirement. It is something far deeper, far more profound. There is nothing good about a recession, other than the fact that it does have a way of clarifying values and reminding us of what is truly important and most valuable.

God's role in human suffering, the apparent silence of God, is one of the enduring mysteries with which men and women of faith have struggled over the centuries. In our age, one of the most eloquent and honest strugglers was, and is, Elie Wiesel, who as a boy was sent to Auschwitz and then Buchenwald, where both his parents and sister died. Wiesel has struggled all his life to make sense of his experience in the context of his Jewish faith to which he continues to hold. In his remarkable memoir *Night*, he tells the story of the day the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp were assembled by the guards and forced to watch the execution of a young boy. It was ghastly, and he remembers a man behind him asking, "Where is God?

Where is God now?" Wiesel says he heard a voice within himself answer, "Where is God? Here he is . . . hanging here on the gallows."

After the war, Catholic novelist and journalist Francois Maruiac interviewed Wiesel and was one of the first to hear that dreadful story. He later wrote,

> And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner. . . . What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine and that the conformity between the cross and human suffering was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery? (*Night*, Introduction, p. 10)

The most important question ever asked—"Where is God?"—prompts the most important answer. God is there, as the people return to their devastated city, as suffering happens, as innocents die, as disease claims its victims. God is there in the midst of it all.

Krista Tippett, host of NPR's popular program *Speaking of Faith,* has written a book of that title in which she tells the story of Margaret Spufford, an English historian and person of remarkable faith. Her life, Tippett says, "has been marked by great misfortune . . . after bearing and nursing two children, a severe osteoporosis . . . keeps her bedridden and in constant threat of bone fractures, and a second daughter [was] born with a calamitous disease of the blood which kept her in and out of hospitals for most of her twenty-two years."

Margaret Spufford asked the questions we all ask, questions faithful people have been asking since the beginning of time: "Did God preordain her treacherously weakened bones? Did God design the genetic malfunction that turned her daughter's short life into one episode of suffering after another?"

Spufford concluded that there is mystery here in her daughter's flawed creation and her own. What came to her instead of an explanation was "a cathartic and visceral certainty that God was present in the suffering with them. The center of Christianity holds an astonishing premise of a creator God who entered the confines of the story of life once it was set in motion—a God who threw himself whole into space and time, the light and darkness of life with us."

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The goodness of God, Margaret Spufford discovered, does not banish the suffering that is bafflingly rife in this world but shares it.

“I cling to the incarnation,” she says. “On those terrible children’s wards I could neither have worshiped or respected any God who had not himself cried, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ [as Jesus cried from the cross].”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Did you notice that the tone changes later in the passage from demand for immediate and violent divine intercession to a beautiful prayer of affirmation?

> Yet, O Lord, you are our Father,
> we are the clay, and you are the potter;
> we are the work of your hand.

Now the image of God is parental and artful. Parents and artists don’t tear apart. A mother’s intercessions in the lives of her children are not likely to be aggressive and violent but lovingly and infinitely patient; shaping lives by love, not coercion; forming a new creature by gentle persuasion, not force. A potter lovingly shapes with her hands, never forces, but patiently, slowly, enables a new creation to come into being. That, the Bible says, is how God comes down: not by ripping open the heavens but in acts of infinitely patient love.

Anne Lamott, in *Traveling Mercies*, tells a story that typically has rough edges and language inappropriate for the pulpit but also theological truth.

A man was telling a friend (actually a bartender) in Alaska, how he had lost whatever faith he’d had after his twin-engine plane crashed in the tundra.

“Yeah,” he says bitterly, “I lay there in the wreckage, hour after hour, nearly frozen to death, crying out to God to save me, praying for help with every ounce of my being, but God didn’t raise a finger to help. So I’m done with that whole charade.”

“But,” says the friend, “You’re here. You *were* saved.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said the man, “because finally [some] Eskimos came along” (p. 117).

That is how God comes: in acts of human kindness and generosity, in acts of justice and political courage, in acts of selfless sacrifice. That is how God comes: when men and women give themselves to others in generous love.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

G. K. Chesterton said once that “God came down and slipped in the back door, to surprise us from behind, in the hidden and personal parts of our being.”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

In our heart of hearts we know that that is exactly what happened in a barn behind an inn in a small town in Judea on the periphery of the Roman Empire. God came down in that most quiet, most intimate, most human way, in the birth of a child.

And that is how God continues to come: in the generous love of people who wait for the child and welcome the child and would follow the child.

That is how God continues to come: in the common, ordinary, human stuff of life, now made new because he was born into it.

“Don’t make me come down there” our refrigerator magnet says. I walked out to the kitchen to look at it one more time, and there it was on the side of the refrigerator—in the middle of pictures of a newborn in the arms of her weary but smiling and proud mother, a high school senior holding up a volleyball tournament trophy, three little girls in impossibly cute Halloween costumes, two sisters and a brother dressed as angels and a wise man for the Christmas pageant, a college student playing her cello, a beloved great grandfather a few weeks before he died.

“Don’t make me come down there”—?

God has. God has come into the world in our own, now blessed, humanness.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Thanks be to God.